

January 22, 2017
Psalm 98
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Sing a New Song

SERMON

Jo Bradley in her research on our hymn practice over the centuries has learned that our worship life together has increasingly involved more and more music. For this we give thanks. The choirs bring us new songs.

When this building was first built, there was only room for 4 people in the choir loft and you had to climb up the tower steps, walk through the organ itself, to get to the organ console. Over the years, this building has been changed to make possible new practices in worship. Now music is a central part of our worship.

Music helps us to keep time with the beat and to touch the timeless. Frederick Buechner, a thoughtful writer about the life of faith, put it this way.

Music helps us to 'keep time' in the sense of keeping us in touch with time, not just time as an everflowing stream that bears all of us away at last, but time also as a stream that every once in a while slows down and becomes transparent enough for us to see down to the stream bed the way, at a wedding, say, or watching the sun rise, past present and future are so caught up in a single moment that we catch a glimpse of the mystery that at its deepest place, time is timeless. (Buechner blog)

Today I'm going to share three recent encounters I've had with that kind of timeless spiritual depth expressed through music.

The first encounter was in something I read. In one of her books, Robin Wall Kimmerer, an environmental biologist and Native American, tells of taking her college students camping for three days in the forest. Her stated goal was to teach them about the diversity of plant life. Her unstated goal was to share the awesomeness of the land.

As their time together is ending, Kimmerer is disappointed in herself, feeling she has focused too much on the technical learning and hasn't moved their spirits. As they are hiking back to the cars she is distressed. However, the group slowly becomes quieter. Then one of them begins to sing "Amazing Grace." She can hear the awe in their voices and is deeply moved. Over the years she has now come to trust that this will happen in a group. Not necessarily that song but the spontaneous joining in song to express gratitude.

The second encounter I heard on the radio, in a report about autism. People with autism often can't read other people's emotions very well. In some cases, they have found that music helps children make connections with how people are feeling.

They told a story of one child and his parents who learned to communicate with one another through the Disney movies that the child watched obsessively and memorized. Researchers believe the music connected to the words of the characters helped the child to learn what the characters were feeling. The music was the emotional connector for this child.

The third encounter was at the Women's Rights event in Augusta yesterday. There were over 5,000 – 10,000 people there. I never made it through the crowd to the Maine United Church of Christ conference "Be the Church" banner but I could see it across the crowd. With the 10,000 plus in Portland, 4,000 plus who went to DC, few hundred here in Brunswick and other gatherings in Maine, there were over 20,000 people in Maine yesterday speaking up for as one sign put it Women's Rights = Human Rights.

In Augusta, there were many people across the age spectrum from our congregation. I saw one wearing a sign saying, "I'm old enough, wise enough, and mad enough to stand up for women's rights." Another one of our members, Judy Karhl, was one of the public speakers. She spoke on behalf of GRR – grandmothers for reproductive rights.

Because there were so many people in Augusta, the loudspeakers couldn't project to the back of the crowd. I could only hear snippets of what was being said from the front. Often when the people in the back couldn't hear the speakers other conversations developed and the chatter was loud. But that changed when a singer came to the microphone and sang for justice and peace. When the music began

the crowd quieted and the music held us together. Music touches the soul.

Thank you to the choirs who share music with us each Sunday. Thank you to our children who wrote our opening hymn, "300 Years Together," which ties together our past, present and future. And Thank you Ray. Thank you.